

# The autonomous city: Towards a critical geography of occupation

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## Abstract

This paper explores the recent resurgence of occupation-based practices across the globe, from the seizure of public space to the assembling of improvised protest camps. It re-examines the relationship between the figure of occupation and the affirmation of an alternative 'right to the city'. The paper develops a critical understanding of occupation as a political process that prefigures and materializes the social order which it seeks to enact. The paper highlights the constituent role of occupation as an autonomous form of urban dwelling, as a radical politics of infrastructure and as a set of relations that produce common spaces for political action.

## Keywords

autonomy, occupation, rights to the city, urban geography

## Introduction

The existential core of urbanism is the desire for radical change. (Edgar Pieterse, 2008: 6)

Europe, Asie, Amérique, disparaissent.  
Notre marche vengeresse *a tout occupé*,  
Cités et campagnes!

[Europe, Asia, America – vanish!  
Our march of vengeance *has occupied every place*,  
Cities and countryside!]

(Arthur Rimbaud, 2003: 123)<sup>1</sup>

On the morning of 28 February 2012, a camp of protesters that had come to occupy the space in front of St Paul's Cathedral in London was forcibly cleared by police officers and bailiffs. The camp – consisting of over two hundred tents and other structures – was set up in the aftermath of

a solidarity protest on 15 October 2011 for the Occupy Wall Street movement (Ball and Quinn, 2012). Protesters attempted to occupy Paternoster Square in front of the London Stock Exchange but were prevented from doing so by the police. In response, a camp was set up in front of St Paul's with the initial support of

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**Editorial note:** PiHG has taken the unusual step of publishing two papers by Alex Vasudevan consecutively in the same hard-copy issue. While the papers can be read independently, they are also explicitly designed as companion pieces that merit being read as a pair. Initially submitted as a single paper, it was at the explicit suggestion of referees that we encouraged the author to split his material into these two companion pieces.

the cathedral. While the protest quickly became a source of controversy for the cathedral, the occupation also grew in size. It expanded to a second square (Finsbury Square) and a third major site was soon opened in a disused office complex owned by the Swiss firm UBS. A fourth site was also established in late December at unused premises of the Old Street Magistrates Court in east London. After the clearing of the St Paul's encampment, occupiers at the other sites were, in the following months, either forcibly evicted or chose to leave peacefully (Townsend and McVeigh, 2011; Walker and Owen, 2011).

The 'Occupy' movement is one of many responses to the wave of austerity measures rolled out by western governments as part of an ongoing global financial crisis (Lunghi and Wheeler, 2012; Bauer et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). As a transnational protest movement, it has focused on economic and social inequality, corporate power and the dismantling of the welfare state in favour of new forms of housing and labour precarity. If the movement builds on the experiences and practices of anti-globalization activists, it draws particular inspiration from the protests that characterized the Arab Spring and that were central to the emergence of the Indignados movement in Spain and elsewhere in southern Europe. From Tahrir Square in Cairo to Zuccotti Park in New York, from Gezi Park in Istanbul to Puerta del Sol in Madrid, the impulse to occupy and reclaim space as a tool for social transformation has been a defining feature of a new and alternative urbanism (see Butler, 2011). This is not to suggest that the 'will to occupy' is somehow generalizable. Each context and occupation is different. And yet, the call for non-representational forms of politics, the assembling of improvised protest camps and the creative re-appropriation of space and time have been central to a new transnational geography of dissent (Mitchell, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

The occupation at St Paul's was, in this respect, highly symbolic. Located in the City

of London, it sought to draw direct attention to the 'violence of financial capitalism' (Marrazi, 2010) and to call time on the predations of contemporary modes of accumulation. It should come perhaps as no surprise then that the Corporation of the City of London quickly withdrew from negotiations with the protesters and began legal proceedings while Government ministers lined up, in turn, to denounce the protesters as mere 'squatters' (Shapps, 2011; see Vasudevan, 2011c). For the Corporation, the claim for repossession was made on the grounds of 'trespass' on a 'public highway' and that it had a 'duty to assert and protect the rights of the public to the use and enjoyment of the highway'. According to the Corporation, the 'semi-permanent' nature of the protest restricted the rights and freedoms of 'those visiting, walking through and working in the area' (Corporation of the City of London, 2011). After a lengthy legal case, the Corporation of the City of London was granted orders for possession and the occupation in front of St Paul's was cleared in the early morning of 28 February 2012.

How are we to make sense of Occupy St Paul's? What conceptual frame can be brought to bear? It would, of course, be tempting to view the protest through the lens of recent work on urban public space governance (see Blomley, 2007a, 2007b, 2010). According to this work, a 'public highway' is best understood as a 'finite public resource that is always threatened by multiple, competing interests and uses' (Blomley, 2010: 3). There is much to recommend in this view, especially as it draws attention to the specific legal practices and knowledges that have come to regulate how particular kinds of public space are used. My own aim in this paper is to use the example of the occupation at St Paul's in order to open up a wider geographical argument about the city: the city as an enduring site of political contestation. If the occupation offers us one pressing example of the different ways in which urban public space is regulated, conceived and argued over, it also

prompts us to reflect on the *composition* of new critical urbanisms. At stake here are important questions surrounding the nature of occupation as a form of spatial politics. How might 'occupation' be conceptualized? What is the relationship between the figure of occupation and the affirmation of an alternative 'right to the city'? And in what way might a critical geography of occupation challenge our conceptualizations of the city?

In order to respond to these framing questions, this paper sets out to show how occupation-based practices have come to re-imagine the city as a space of refuge and gathering, protest and subversion. This is, I realize, an ambitious project, and one of my main aims here is to extract a *spatial grammar* that seeks to engage with and disrupt the longstanding relationship between capitalist accumulation and urbanization (Harvey, 2008, 2012). There are, of course, certain risks in attempting to gather up such a geographically diverse set of practices under the heading of 'occupation'. At the same time, it is also essential, in my view, not to shy away from recasting the right to the city as a right that is operative across multiple sites and territories and that is characterized by a *constituent* desire to participate in the production of urban space. To do so demands a recognition that the right to the city encompasses a wide range of political imaginations and that a conceptual architecture is needed that accommodates this diversity. It is in this context, therefore, that I develop an understanding of occupation as a political process that *materializes* the social order which it seeks to enact. Occupation, according to this view, involves different ways of extending bodies, objects and practices into space in order to create new alternative lifeworlds. As the rest of the paper shows, the relationship between occupation and the production of a renewed right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996 [1967]) can be discerned through three interlocking frames of reference: autonomy, infrastructure and the common.

In what follows, I develop a critical and *autonomous* understanding of 'occupation' that

focuses on 'its world-making potentialities' (Muñoz, 2009: 56). The very site of occupation represents, according to this view, a place of collective *world-making* – a place to quite literally build an alternative *habitus* where the act of occupation becomes the basis for producing a common spatial field 'in which the ongoing interactions of participants continually produce sentiments, ideas, values and practices that manifest and encourage new modes of being' (Gould, 2009: 178; see Vasudevan, 2011a). An autonomous recasting of the figure of occupation thus performs a reversal in the conventional historical understanding of the word as a label for military conquest and settler colonialism (Mitchell, 2012: 12). To occupy or counter-occupy, in other words, is to insist on *building* the necessary conditions for social justice and new autonomous forms of collective life. Particular emphasis is placed here on practices that seek to re-articulate the city as a 'flexible resource' for other forms of political, social and economic organization (Simone, 2008: 200).

Such a process depends, in turn, on the development of specific infrastructures through which an act of occupation is transformed into a set of alternative spatial practices. As W.J.T. Mitchell reminds us, 'occupation is, in addition to its spatial connotations, an art of duration and endurance' (2012: 13). The recent occupations and encampments of Tahrir Square, Wall Street and St Paul's were not temporary or transitory gatherings. They were complex socio-material orderings that connected people to ideas, practices, resources and things. These were spaces that were assembled to endure and were, as such, constituted through 'protest architectures' that sought to generate new forms of assembly and attachment, debate and dwelling. Occupation as a *radical politics of infrastructure* thus revises the city as a set of relations that take form as alternative *common* spaces for political action (Mitropoulos, 2013; see McFarlane and Vasudevan, 2013). To occupy, in this context,

is to constitute the common(s) as a point of departure for rethinking how we come to think about and inhabit the city.

In the remainder of this paper, I develop these arguments in three main stages. I begin by briefly reviewing the now burgeoning literature on the right to the city and its potential as a theoretical frame for developing a geographical approach to the practice of occupation. I then move on to examine a range of 'occupations' from urban squatting to workplace and university occupations to protest camps, focusing on the production of what I would like to call the 'autonomous city'. In so doing I zoom in on the relationship between alternative infrastructures, the constitution of urban commons and a revived right to the city. The paper concludes by offering three orientations towards a *critical geography of occupation*: first, a detailed *empirical* focus on the production of new forms of alterity and resistance and with a particular emphasis on the processes through which political horizons are made, unmade and remade; second, a *theoretical* imaginary that extends our understanding of how emancipatory urban politics are assembled, contested and made 'common'; and third, an *historical* perspective that re-imagines the autonomous city as a living archive of alternative knowledges, materials and resources.

## Re-assembling a right to the city

As recent geographical scholarship has shown, Henri Lefebvre's (1996 [1967]) idea of 'the right to the city' has increasingly become a central theoretical tool for the conceptualization of more just and equal urbanisms. From discussions on gentrification and the politics of housing to work on public space and social exclusion, the right to the city has been embraced by scholars who have sought to rethink various urban struggles along new lines (Attoh, 2011: 675; see Dikeç, 2005; Harvey, 2008; Mitchell, 2003; Purcell, 2003). Much

of this work has centred on *who* possesses this right and *what* a right to the city might mean for the assembling of a more democratic urban politics. The practical significance and application of these rights – from how they are defined to the final form that they take – has also come under increasing scrutiny (Attoh, 2011). As Kafui Attoh (2011) has persuasively argued, the right to the city has been variously theorized as a right to occupy and re-imagine public space (Mitchell, 2003), a right to housing (Holm, 2010), a right to transportation (Bickl, 2005) and a right to natural resources such as water (Phillips and Gilbert, 2005). Others (e.g. Mitchell and Heynen, 2009) have focused on the right to the city as a right against new and multiplying forms of urban revanchism (police brutality, state surveillance, etc.) and as a right to the use and redistribution of urban surpluses (Harvey, 2008). While the right to the city has therefore been ascribed to all manner of groups, the very distinctions and conflicts between rights are, according to Attoh, 'distinctions and conflicts with which the literature on the right to the city has yet to grapple' (2011: 675). In Attoh's view, the radical openness and strategic fuzziness of a right to the city approach must be tempered by a greater commitment to thinking through what a 'right to the city can and ought to entail' (2011: 679).

This is a powerful argument and, if I share Attoh's critical scepticism, my own aim is to shift some attention back to Lefebvre's original conception of the right to the city and its potential relationship to the figure of 'occupation'. Lefebvre's *Le Droit à la ville* was completed in 1967 to commemorate the centenary of the publication of Marx's *Capital*. If the book's title was soon adopted as a slogan during the events of 1968, it also forms part of a much broader project on the centrality of urban life under capitalism which came to include books such as *La Révolution urbaine* (1970), *La Production de l'espace* (1974) and *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (1992).

At the heart of Lefebvre's project is an understanding of the city as a work – an *oeuvre* – produced by the daily actions of those who live in the city. The right to the city, according to Lefebvre, is a right to inhabitation, appropriation and participation. It is both the right to inhabit and *be in the city* and the right to redefine and produce the city in terms that challenge the routinizing demands of capitalist accumulation. Lefebvre's rights are, in this way, 'rights of use rather than rights of exchange' (Purcell, 2003: 578). The right to re-appropriation thus implies the right to reclaim and reconfigure urban space as an *oeuvre* and 'to maximise use value for residents rather than to maximise exchange value for capital' (Purcell, 2003: 578).

Lefebvre's positive re-affirmation of a right to habitation engages the problem of necessity and precarity head-on. It also, in my view, allows us to retain a right to the city that is *open-ended* and responsive to a politics that is both prefigurative and non-representational. For Lefebvre, such an articulation of a radical urban politics can also be extended to the concept of '*autogestion*', which he uses to describe a process of worker autonomy and self-management and which should, in his view, be extended beyond the factory into all spheres of everyday life (the state, the family, education, etc.). 'Each time', he writes, 'a social group ... refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, of survival, each time such a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its own conditions of existence, *autogestion* is occurring' (Lefebvre, 2009: 135). The political project of autogestion, in other words, is a constitutively geographical project to 'transform the way we produce and use space' (Purcell, 2013: 41). At stake here, Lefebvre argues, is the 'production of a space that is other' (1991: 391). Lefebvre (quoted in Purcell, 2013) describes this space as a 'differential space' whereby:

Living labour can produce something that is no longer a thing ... needs and desires can

reappear as such, informing both the act of producing and its products. There still exist – and there may exist in the future – spaces for play, spaces for enjoyment, architectures of wisdom or pleasure. In and by means of [differential] space, the work may shine through the product, use value may gain the upper hand over exchange value: appropriation ... may (virtually) achieve domination over domination, as the imaginary and the utopian incorporate (or are incorporated) into the real. (42)

If Lefebvre's understanding of autogestion and differential space points to a different kind of politics – autonomous, common and prefigurative (Purcell, 2013) – it also foregrounds the importance of re-appropriating space for the production of a 'transformed and renewed right to urban life' (Lefebvre, 1996 [1967]: 158).

There is, of course, no doubt that a workable notion of the right to the city must still confront the contradictions, divisions and exclusions implicit in rights claims. At the same time, it is equally important to recognize the *constituent* dimension of Lefebvre's original claims (see Merrifield, 2013). To do so is also to 'redefine the reality and the meaning of the word "rights"', as Antonio Negri has recently argued (2004: 109). In *The Porcelain Workshop*, Negri develops an alternative theory of rights that challenges the subsumption of subjective rights under modern public law. 'The right to resistance', he writes, 'is neither absolute nor self-justified. It is rather a right built upon common demands and social cooperation.' For Negri, 'subjective rights are not simply the defense of individual interests'. Rather, they consist, if anything, in the 'desire that cooperation, the collective power of the production of value and wealth be acknowledged'. Such rights, Negri concludes, 'must therefore be defined as what gives claim to *exercise the common*' (2004: 110, 111, 112; emphasis in original). According to Negri, all of this depends on the concretization of subjective rights which implies, in his own words, 'their development in space'



(2004: 113). It is in precisely this context that Lefebvre's own project is, it seems to me, geographically *generative* insofar as it imagines a right to participate in the *production of urban space* (see Purcell, 2003).<sup>3</sup>

At stake here, as I hope to show in what follows, is an understanding of the city as it is produced through an ever thickening and indeterminate intersection of bodies, materials, spaces and things (Simone, 2011: 357; see McFarlane, 2011b). The enduring significance of Lefebvre's right to the city thus remains its potential to prefigure and generate new counter-spaces of adaptation and experimentation, protest and dissent (see Lefebvre, 1991). In the next section, I build on this argument and zoom in on the figure of occupation. More precisely, I show that the connecting thread between different occupation-based practices is the active composition of a space that affords – in both form and content – the necessary conditions for the articulation of a right to a different city.

## Occupation and the autonomous city

This paper opened with the words of the 19th-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, which might seem to offer, on first inspection, an unusual point of departure for rethinking the figure of occupation. At the same time, they have, more recently, come to serve as something of a rallying cry for a resurgence of occupation-based practices that have included the mass gatherings against authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, the makeshift protest camps that have challenged the 'escalating precarization' of working peoples in southern Europe and the ongoing struggles for public education throughout Europe and the Americas (Butler, 2011). But even more than this, Rimbaud's words were themselves closely connected to the events of the Paris Commune, the largely leaderless government which transformed Paris in the early spring of

1871 into an autonomous Commune and set about the free organization of its social life (Ross, 1988: 5). For Kristin Ross, Rimbaud's poetry constituted a 'creative response to the same objective situation to which the insurrection in Paris was another' (1988: 32). As Ross argues, the very organization and texture of Rimbaud's verse offered a complementary poetic space to the autonomous social one activated by the insurgents in the heart of Paris. While the dramatic seizure of the government by Parisian workers was undoubtedly a response to smouldering class antagonisms and the political realities of the Second Empire, it also produced a geography of protest through which deep forms of social regimentation were challenged and dismantled. 'The workers' redescend into the centre of Paris', writes Ross, 'followed in part from the political significance of the city centre within a tradition of popular insurgency, and in part from their desire to reclaim the public space from which they had been expelled, to reoccupy streets that once were theirs' (1988: 41).

For workers, to occupy 'every place' was to challenge the predetermination of their lives and to transform the very space and time assigned to them. Ross's account of the Commune is again instructive here: 'the lesson of the Commune can be found in its recognition that revolution consists not in changing the juridical form that allots space/time but rather in completely transforming the nature of space/time' (1988: 41; see Raunig, 2010). As an occupation, the Paris Commune thus represented an attempt to produce an autonomous social space. In the words of Marx's own text on the Commune, 'this was ... a revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican, or imperialist form of State power. It was a revolution against the State itself ... a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life' (Marx, 1871). What this entailed in practical terms was a displacement of political action onto the lived rhythms and material foundations

of daily life from work and leisure to housing and family. Autonomy was, in other words, actively assembled as new principles of association and co-operation were extended deep into the structures of everyday life (Ross, 1988: 5, 33; see Lefebvre, 1965). All of this led, in turn, to the development of alternative forms of political encounter and gathering characterized by both a spatial openness and a spontaneous and immersive sense of time. Political clubs and informal women's groups combined with grassroots general assemblies and quarter committees to produce a new alternative infrastructure in the city while the rapid circulation and dissemination of political posters, notices and announcements meant that the everyday life of the city was now such that 'citizens were no longer informed of their history after the fact but were actually *occupying* the moment of its realization' (Ross, 1988: 42; emphasis added; see also Raunig, 2010).

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the Paris Commune has been held up by many as the definitive model for a radical urban politics (see Hardt and Negri, 2004). It would be misleading, however, to see the 73-day occupation as 'the glorious harbinger of a new society' (Marx, 1871). For the communards, the occupation had already, in effect, constituted a new social space. To occupy, in this context, was actively to challenge the forms by which domination was 'imprinted on their bodies' and 'imposed on their actions', and to offer in their place a shared *common* world whose very workings and imaginings subverted the dominant order of time and space (see Rancière, 2012 [1981]: ix, xi). The historical significance of the Commune to a wider critical geography of occupation connects, in this way, to W.J.T. Mitchell's recent recasting of the figure of occupation as both a visual and physical presence and a discursive and rhetorical practice (2012: 9–10). To 'occupy' has, of course, multiple meanings: to seize possession and maintain control over; to fill up time or space; to dwell or reside in;

to hold an office or position; to engage the attention or captivate (*The Free Dictionary*). According to Mitchell, the political act of occupation also shares common cause with the classical trope of *occupatio*, which he describes as the 'tactic of anticipating an adversary's arguments by preempting them, taking the initiative in a space where one knows in advance that there will be resistance and counterarguments' (2012: 10). As Mitchell shows, the original meaning of the word describes 'the seizure of an empty place' – one traditionally conferred the status of *res nullius*, which is to say not owned by anyone. For Mitchell, the rhetoric of *occupatio* thus represents a right to and demand for '*presence*, an insistence on being heard, before any specific political demands are made; a demand that the public be allowed to gather and remain in a public space' (2012: 10, emphasis in original). This is, moreover, a demand that is made, Mitchell insists, in the knowledge that such a space has already been occupied and contained by the state and the police, and that its putatively benign and inclusive character is ultimately conditioned by the possibility of violent eviction. *Occupatio* aims, in this way, not only to occupy an empty space in an argument, but to anticipate and provoke a response and frame it in advance (Mitchell, 2012: 10).

At the same time, the recent historical geography of occupation demands an understanding of *occupatio* as the seizure of an empty space that is, in fact, a 'space of fullness and plenitude' (Mitchell, 2012: 10). For Mitchell, the common thread connecting the occupations at Tahrir Square to Puerta del Sol to Zuccotti Park was a refusal, on the one hand, to describe the alternative world that they wanted to create while, on the other hand, disclosing this very world as a *working common space*. To occupy was, in other words, to substitute a limited commitment to specific political demands with the active production of a space through which such demands could find material form and support

(Mitchell, 2012: 10, 11; see Butler, 2011). The relationship between occupation as an alternative political tactic and the affirmation of a right to the city is not, therefore, reducible to legal strategies and specific rights claims. Rather, it speaks to the question of political assembly as such and to the collective actions that reconfigure and refunction what will be common and what will be the space of politics (Butler, 2011). Following Judith Butler, the act of occupation ‘exercises a right that is no right’. This is a right, Butler argues, that is being actively contested and destroyed by the force of the state and which, in its resistance to such force, ‘articulates its persistence, and its right to persistence’. ‘This right’, Butler continues,

is codified nowhere . . . It is, in fact, the right to have rights, not as natural law or metaphysical stipulation, but as the persistence of the body against those forces that seek to monopolise legitimacy. A persistence that requires the mobilization of space, and that cannot happen without a set of material supports mobilised and mobilising. (Butler, 2011)

What is at stake here is an understanding of ‘occupation’ as a political process that *materializes* the social order which it seeks to enact. It is, after all, the countless acts of solidarity and belonging that in the end become the *space of support* – the shifting infrastructure – through which a common space for political transformation is constantly made and remade.

In the remainder of this paper I explore how the common work of occupation involves different ways of extending bodies, objects and practices into space in order to create new alternative lifeworlds. To do so, I work closely with a range of occupation-based practices and show how, taken together, they offer a model for the composition of an ‘autonomous city’. My main intention here is to show how occupation, as a form of ‘*world-making*’ or ‘*worlding*’, offers important insights into the production of what

Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton have elsewhere described as *autonomous geographies* – ‘those spaces where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian, and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation’ (2006: 730). For Pickerill and Chatterton, the production of autonomous geographies is a multi-scalar process that weaves ‘together spaces and times’ and that may be variously understood ‘as a form of interstitial politics; as a process of resistance and creation; and as a coherent attempt at praxis with its strong sense of prefigurative politics and commitment to the revolution of the everyday’ (2006: 732). This is, not surprisingly perhaps, a process that has its own long and complex historical geography and that has been adopted within a wide range of political traditions including situationism, social anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism, Zapatismo, ecologism and other anti-capitalist movements (see Raunig, 2007).

If ‘autonomy’ describes a concept that is contextually and relationally grounded in social struggles stretching across different times and spaces, it also, according to Pickerill and Chatterton, draws attention to the need for real tangible alternatives that challenge the precarious nature of capitalist existence. This has assumed, as they show, many different geographical forms that include experiments in living autonomously and that have asserted, in turn, a renewed concern with a right to participate in the making and remaking of urban space. In what follows, I begin by examining the recent history of urban squatting in the Global North as an autonomous urban movement. I then shift attention to the workplace and the university campus, focusing on the role that occupations have played – from the factory floor to the lecture hall – as alternative sites of social [re]-production (Ness and Azzellini, 2011). I conclude by returning to the protest camp as a constitutive site for the composition of a radical urban politics. It is not my intention here to provide an



exhaustive mapping of recent occupation-based political tactics but rather to offer a set of orientations through which a different city is assembled, lived and contested (McFarlane, 2011b: 1). Occupation, according to this view, is contingent on the articulation of *pre-figurative geographies* that carry with them the lineaments of a different mode of shared city life.

### Squatting and the autonomous city

In a now classic book on the nature of housing and planning, *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments*, the architect and urbanist John Turner argues that housing ‘must be autonomous’ (1976: 17; see also Turner, 1972). While the immediate context for Turner’s book was his own experience in the 1960s working in the rapidly expanding self-built and self-governing *barridas* of Peru, the book also offers a more philosophical disquisition on the ‘housing question’ across both the Global North and South. As Colin Ward argues in a preface to Turner’s book, the most important thing about housing, for Turner, ‘is not what it *is*, but what it *does* in people’s lives’ (Ward in Turner, 1976: 5; emphasis in original). According to Turner, ‘when dwellers control the major decisions and are free to make their own contribution to the design, construction or management of their housing, both the process and the environment produced stimulate individual and social well-being’ (1972: 241).

The work of Turner and others has been instrumental in rethinking the practical dimensions of how people learn to house themselves in settings of extreme inequality. Not only were the shortcomings of state-planned mass housing projects exposed, but a new planning paradigm that prioritized ‘self-help’ and ‘architectural empowerment’ quickly emerged and took hold, especially in certain parts of the Global South (Serageldin, 1997). While Turner eventually

shied away from some of the more radical implications of his work, the recent history of urban squatting in Europe, as Miguel Martínez López (2013) has argued, may plausibly be seen as a series of attempts to extend and recast the concept of housing ‘autonomy’. López places particular emphasis on the development of squatting in Europe as a ‘paradigmatic autonomous urban movement’ (López, 2013: 867). The broader significance of López’s argument to a global geography of squatting is admittedly beyond the compass of this essay and is explored in a companion piece (Vasudevan, 2015b). In the remainder of this section, I narrow my sightlines in order to develop a critical and *autonomous* understanding of urban squatting in the Global North that focuses on ‘its world-making potentialities’ (Muñoz, 2009: 56). The squat represented, in this context, a place of collective *world-making* – a place to imagine alternative worlds, to express anger and solidarity, to explore new identities and different intimacies, to experience and share new feelings, and to defy authority and live autonomously (Gould, 2009: 178). Squatting thus offered an opportunity quite literally to build an alternative *habitus* where the very practice of ‘occupation’ became the basis for producing a radical urban infrastructure and a different sense of shared dwelling or inhabitation.

As a number of scholars have recently shown, the veritable explosion of squatting in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s represents one important example in the production of an alternative and autonomous urbanism (Bieri, 2012; Mikkelsen and Karpantschhof, 2001; SqEK, 2013; Vasudevan, 2011a; Waits and Wolmar, 1980). For many scholars, this wave of squatting represented a ‘new urban movement’ characterized by the development of practices around collective forms of self-determination, struggles against housing precarity and a broader commitment to alter-global concerns and extra-parliamentary modes of political engagement (López, 2013: 881; see Pruijt,

2003; SqEK, 2013). From the late 1960s and early 1970s onwards, a major wave of urban squatting grew first in countries like Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, France, Switzerland and Italy and, in more recent decades, in places such as Spain, Greece and Poland. While these developments came to depend on the assembling of transnational social and political networks and the sharing of action repertoires and other forms of ‘urban learning’ (McFarlane, 2011b), the degree to which they, on the one hand, cohered as a single urban movement is open to debate. On the other hand, it is possible to identify a series of practices, skills and tactics which, taken together, provide a different lens for linking urban occupation and radical infrastructure.

In most cases, urban squatting cultivated an ethos of self-determination and autonomy – a radical DIY empiricism – that focused on the rehabilitation of buildings and the active assembling of new forms of dwelling. In practical terms, this depended on a modest *ontology* of mending and repair as squatters often confronted abandoned spaces that required significant renovation (McFarlane and Vasudevan, 2013; see also Vasudevan, 2011a). Makeshift materials and do-it-yourself practices combined with the sharing of food and other resources to provide the material supports for collective self-management. The squatted or occupied space that was ultimately cobbled together through such *building* and *making* was, therefore, an assemblage of materials, ideas, knowledges and practices through which a right to an alternative city was formed and shared. For many squatters there was, in other words, a close relationship between the articulation of an alternative urbanism and the emancipatory appropriation of the built environment (Vasudevan, 2011a). From London to Amsterdam, Copenhagen to Berlin, squatted spaces became a key site through which the generative potential of a radical urban commons was (quite literally) constructed and explored.

Urban squatting was also seen, in this way, as the political *other* to ‘creative destruction’. The occupation and re-appropriation of empty buildings and houses by squatters in various major cities in Europe from the late 1960s onwards offered a direct challenge to urban speculation, widespread housing shortages and commercial planning initiatives. As a form of ‘direct action’, squatting represented both an ‘attack on the unjust distribution of urban goods’ and an attempt to link alternative forms of collective living with non-institutional grassroots urban politics (López, 2013: 871). For many squatters, this involved a basic attempt to carve out autonomous spaces that not only responded to the hardships of creative destruction and accumulation by dispossession, but also served as emancipatory sites that would come to challenge the unyielding predetermination of lives and livelihoods (Bodenschatz et al., 1983; Péchu, 2010; SqEK, 2013; Vasudevan, 2011a). For others, this was predicated on *queering* the home as a site of domesticity and social reproduction and where the everyday micro-politics of making a ‘home’ countered not only traditional performances of housekeeping and kinship but also unsettled conventional distinctions between publicity and privacy and, in so doing, proffered radically new orientations for shared living (Brown, 2007; Cook, 2013; Amantine, 2011).

Since the late 1960s, squatters in Europe have duly transformed the urban landscape into a living archive of alternative knowledges, materials and resources. Squatters in the UK, *krakers* in Holland and *Hausbesetzer* in Germany and Switzerland have responded to critical housing shortages through the occupation of empty buildings and the development of tactics to support working-class and migrant communities who often have suffered severe housing deprivation (Pruijt, 2013: 22; see Bailey, 1973; Van Diepen and Bruijn-Muller, 1977). For many squatters in Denmark, Germany and Italy, ‘occupation’ came to be increasingly connected with wider autonomous social movements and

where the reappropriation and rehabilitation of buildings produced a suitable arena for challenging the ‘capitalist production of urban space’ (López, 2013: 870; see Amantine, 2012; Baer and Dellwo, 2012). Squatted ‘social centres’ – most notably in Italy, Spain and the UK – have also played an important role in the constitution of alternative urban infrastructures that often combined housing needs and desires with broader political activities (Chatterton and Hodkinson, 2006; Mudu, 2004). As López (2013: 875) has argued, such centres often enjoyed a prominent place in local neighbourhoods, offering space for activists and artists while hosting initiatives associated with other closely-related campaigns and practices (anti-fascist organizing, migrants’ and precarious workers’ rights, urban gardening schemes, etc.). But more than this, squats and other social centres were not only embedded within a local ecology of practices and knowledges, they were also increasingly dependent on a host of *translocal connections* that linked activists across northern and southern Europe and that played a crucial role in the circulation and assembling of an alternative makeshift urbanism.

And yet, if squatters across Europe disseminated and shared informal practices of DIY maintenance and repair and other forms of urban ‘learning’, these were practices that also *moved* into and *circulated* within formal policy networks and were often captured by the state. Notwithstanding criminal persecution, squatted houses in the 1980s and 1990s across Europe were often contractually ‘pacified’ through legalization and the promise of public funding (Holm and Kuhn, 2010; see also Uitermark, 2011). As Kurt Iveson has recently argued, ‘DIY practices of appropriating urban space and infrastructure for alternative purposes do not necessarily constitute a democratic urban politics that will give birth to a new city’ (2013: 954). What often began as an insurgent form of ‘self-help’ or a small-scale urban intervention has, in many cases, also become a major mechanism in the

commodification of urban space as tactics of informal urban living have been appropriated and transformed into new strategies for neoliberal urban renewal (Balaban, 2011). Ann Deslandes (2012) and many others have shown how new temporary forms of ‘DIY urbanism’ – from pop-up shops to site-specific art initiatives – have sprung up in recent years in Europe, North America and Australia. These initiatives have focused on place-making and the economic regeneration of urban areas. While it has become more difficult, in this context, to squat across Europe and elsewhere in the Global North, other occupation-based practices – temporary or otherwise – have continued to imagine new possibilities for a renewed right to the city. In the next section, I switch attention to the significance of the workplace and the university campus to a critical geography of occupation.

## Occupation and the commons

The recent history of urban squatting in Europe and elsewhere in the Global North underscores the degree to which a different ‘right to the city’ was shaped by the quest for what Lefebvre (1991: 383) once described as a ‘counter-space’. Squatted spaces promoted, in other words, the assembling of radical urban infrastructures and the development of new practices of shared living that offered ‘not only inventive ways of perceiving and acting in urban space, but new forms of urban learning and possibility’ (McFarlane, 2011b: 182). This was a process that, according to Lefebvre, was contingent on the production of a common field that offered an alternative to the kind of ‘temporal and spatial shell’ solicited by capitalist urbanization (1991: 384). Urban squatting as a form of ‘occupation’ thus not only challenged the dominant image of urban development, it also prefigured a critical ‘pedagogy of space and time’ through which the forms, contours and imaginaries of a radically different city were assembled and

shared, conceived and contested (Lefebvre, 1991: 334; see also Schwartz-Weinstein, 2012). Such a pedagogy, as Lefebvre understood it, was never limited to urban squatting and it continues, if anything, to be implicated within a wider urban politics that links the production of autonomous geographies to the practice of occupation. There is, after all, a long history (and geography) of labour activism where workers occupied factories and other workplaces, forming autonomous councils and self-managed collectives (Ness and Azzellini, 2011; see Chatterton, 2005). From revolutionary shop stewards in Germany during the First World War to factory councils in Italy in 1919 and 1920, from the collectivization of private firms during the Spanish Civil War to the occupation of factories in Britain during the early 1970s, there exists a rich history of occupation that draws attention to the wide range of practices that transformed the workplace into an important site of autonomous organization and production (Gorostiza et al., 2013; see collection of essays in Ness and Azzellini, 2011).

Perhaps the most important point of reference for labour activism and radical autonomous movements in the Global North over the past few decades remains, however, Italian autonomism and the broader autonomous Marxist tradition which it came to inspire (Lotringer and Marazzi, 2007; Wright, 2002). Groups such as *Autonomia Operaio* (Workers' Autonomy), *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power) and *Lotta Continua* (The Struggle Continues) were formed in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s as part of a burgeoning extraparliamentary left that became increasingly preoccupied with the 'emerging autonomy of the working class with respect to capital, that is, its power to generate and sustain social forms and structures of value independent of capitalist relations of production, and similarly the potential autonomy of social forces from the domination of the State' (Hardt, 1996: 2). At stake here, as Mario Tronti, one of Italian *Operaismo*'s early

interlocutors argued, was a form of working-class *self-organization* that refused to 'function as an articulation of capitalist society' and to therefore 'act as an active partner in the whole social process' (Tronti, 1965). By the early 1970s, such a 'strategy of refusal' had prompted the struggle to shift focus from the factory to the wider city through an *expanded autonomous geography* that included workplace occupations, pirate radio stations and countless squats. As Michael Hardt concluded, 'the antagonism between labor and capital that had developed in the closed spaces of the shop floor now invested all forms of social interaction' (1996: 2).

For other theorists of *Autonomia*, including Negri, the composition of an autonomous politics represented a direct response to the 'real subsumption' of all labour and production processes within the ambit of capitalist relations. In Negri's view, it was only 'an organised act of antagonistic separation' that could elicit the emergence of 'living labour as a collective subject capable of appropriating a production process founded on the exploitation of its capacities' (Toscano, 2009: 110; see also Negri, 2004; Read, 1999). If capitalist 'totality' represented the social texture in which we all now find ourselves, we must, as Negri argued, separate ourselves in order to exist. What Negri and others thus described as *Autonomia* represented the possibility of a radical separation from the logics of capital and the assembling of an autonomous alternative sociality. In practical terms, this was characterized by an intense period of social and cultural experimentation that reached its high point in Italy in the summer of 1977 and was ultimately the subject of a brutal crackdown by the state.

Defeat and political repression should not detract from the historical and geographical significance of Italian *Autonomia*. As the French philosopher, psychoanalyst and activist Félix Guattari noted in a 1982 interview with Sylvère Lotringer, 'that the Italian *Autonomia*

was wiped out proves nothing at all. From time to time, a kind of social chemistry provides us with a glimpse of what could be another type of organization' (Guattari and Lotringer, 2009 [1982]: 119). Autonomous practices were not confined to discrete localities but were, so Guattari argued, always part of broader transnational networks that facilitated the forging of new identities and the rebuilding of solidarities across time and space (Guattari, 2009; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006: 736; see Featherstone, 2013). The brutal dissolution of *Autonomia* was, in this way, accompanied by the revival of other autonomous spaces across Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s, while certain elements of today's alter-globalization movements have built on and reworked this tradition in equally creative and experimental ways (AG Grauwaske, 2008).

In recent years, a new 'transnational current of student revolt and youth militancy' has attempted to revive the practice of occupation as a direct response to the neoliberalization of the university, as well as to broader austerity reforms following the onset of the global financial crisis in 2007 (Schwarz-Weinstein, 2012). Drawing inspiration from a rich and sedimented history of student activism that stretches back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, and also building on new insurgent youth movements in France, Greece and Italy, a wave of student occupations hit the United States in the fall of 2008 on both the east and west coasts. They emerged, as Zach Schwartz-Weinstein (2012) has suggested, 'from a shared, if contentious, vision of radical refusal and expropriation of the neoliberal university, and initiated a new tactical and ideological phase of struggle within and beyond US campuses'. While the students who had earlier occupied universities and seized public spaces across Italy proclaimed that 'we won't pay for your crisis', their counterparts in California, according to Schwartz-Weinstein, argued that they themselves *were* the crisis (Schwarz-Weinstein, 2012; Roggero and Do, 2010; see

also Roggero, 2011). At stake was the very system of class formation and manufactured indebtedness which had transformed them into the living embodiment of bio-capital (see Armstrong, 2012; Lazzarato, 2012). In the words of one student commentator and protester, 'debt carries a gravitational force, which draws students on into futures subordinated to its imperatives' (Armstrong, 2012).

The accelerated marketization of higher education prompted a similar wave of protest and occupation in the United Kingdom in the fall of 2010 and in Chile and Colombia in 2011 and 2012 (see Hancox, 2011).<sup>4</sup> In Québec, students initiated a successful student strike in 2012 which at its peak in March involved over 300,000 students. Student occupations in the UK and elsewhere also spawned the emergence of radical pedagogical alternatives based on co-production and participatory methods such as the Really Open University in Leeds, the Really Free School in London, the Edufactory collective across Italy, Fakultæt Null in Berlin, the Slow University of Warsaw, the Universidad Nómada in Madrid and many others (see Neary, 2012; Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013; Roggero, 2011). In each case, occupation represented far more than a simple refusal of neoliberalism's 'predatory grasp on university space' and the concomitant 'unmaking' of the university as a public institution. The occupation of lecture halls, outsourced cafeterias and management offices centred on *refunctioning* the built infrastructure of the university. Students attempted, in other words, to transform the spatial practices of the campus and turn the everyday geographies of academic labour into key sites within a broader struggle against the increasingly 'global university of capital' (Schwarz-Weinstein, 2012). 'Occupation', as one group of students argued, 'mandates the *inversion* of the standard dimensions of space. Space in an occupation is not merely the container of our bodies, it is a plane of potentiality that



has been frozen by the logic of the commodity' (Inoperative Committee, 2009; emphasis added). Occupation, according to this view, was never limited to the formation of oppositional spaces. It was increasingly characterized by calls for new autonomous modes of education and a desire to 'transform the campus into a base for alternative knowledge production that is accessible to those outside its walls' (After the Fall Communiqués, 2010; see Burton, 2013; Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013).

As 'emerging spaces of protest, radical pedagogy and collective creativity', university occupations should be seen as part of a broader practice of *commoning* (Burton, 2013: 471; Hudson and Cook, forthcoming; Schwartz-Weinstein, 2012; see also Jeffrey et al., 2012). This is the thrust of the argument in a recent essay by Schwartz-Weinstein (2012), who shows how student movements in recent years have seized on, adopted and reworked a rich radical tradition rooted in autonomist and post-workerist thinking, one which focuses on the 'common' or the 'commons' as the very spaces, materials and practices that possess or have acquired a certain autonomy from capital and/or the state (see also Negri, 2004; Hardt and Negri, 2009). For Gigi Roggero, one of the founders of the Edu-factory collective in Italy, the borders of the university must now be conceived of as an 'institution of the commons' (2011: 9). In practical terms, to occupy and re-imagine the space of the campus has come to mean, on the one hand, the production of autonomous forms of education. On the other hand, student occupiers have also attempted to foster connections with other protest movements, while the trajectories of student struggles worldwide have often intersected with broader anti-austerity initiatives. The very act of occupation thus represents 'the material manifestation of a desire' that is located within the academy, and yet seeks to go beyond the university in its current form in order to affirm and prefigure other

forms of knowledge production and learning (Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013: 451). As one prominent communiqué published during the 2009 student occupations in California proclaimed, 'the university struggle is one among many, one sector where a new cycle of refusal and insurrection has begun – in workplaces, neighborhoods and slums. All of our futures are linked, and so our movement will have to join with these others, breaching the walls of the university compounds and spilling into the streets' (Research and Destroy, 2009).

In the past few years, student occupations have thus turned to a more ambitious and expansive repertoire of spatial tactics that were often shared across a transnational landscape of protest and resistance. Boycotts, blockades, flash mobs, spontaneous marches and walkouts have all contributed to the constitution of a spatial politics that connected a *right to education* with a commitment to an alternative *right to the city* and to wider geographies of occupation and solidarity. As Roggero (2011) points out, the aggressive expansion of universities in cities is often *mimetic* as the imperatives of a knowledge economy intersect with new forms of urban 'regeneration'. 'The university becomes [the] metropolis', he concludes, 'and the metropolis becomes [the] university' (2011: 94–5). While Roggero's own work places particular emphasis on New York, the recent collaboration between students and local community activists to protest successfully against plans by University College London to build a £1 billion campus in Stratford, East London, and to demolish the Carpenter housing estate in the neighbouring borough of Newham has also helped to bring these shared trajectories into sharper focus (see Richard B, 2012).

Against a backdrop of uneven development, heightened indebtedness and a future of increasingly precarious work, a growing number of students in London and elsewhere have, in the end, chosen to challenge the very idea of the university as a 'place of refuge and enlightenment'

(Research and Destroy, 2009). For many, the Invisible Committee's recent injunction (2009) in *The Coming Insurrection* to 'form communes' has become a talismanic call to arms. At the heart of the book lies an appeal to create new liberated territories, new communes and new zones of autonomy (see Merrifield, 2010). 'Local self-organisation', it argues, 'superimposes its own geography over the state cartography, scrambling and blurring it: it produces its own secession.' 'We don't want to occupy the territory', it adds, 'we want to *be* the territory' (Invisible Committee, 2009: 108–9; emphasis in original). For student occupiers, this 'will to territory' increasingly became an invitation to occupy other spaces and scale up their struggle. As CLASSE, the largest student union in Québec, proclaimed in the spring of 2012:

For months now, all over Québec, the streets have vibrated to the rhythm of hundreds of thousands of marching feet. What started out as a movement underground, still stiff with winter consensus, gathered new strength in the spring and flowed freely, energizing students, parents, grandparents, children and people with and without jobs ... The way we see it, direct democracy should be experienced, every moment of every day ... This is the meaning of our vision and the essence of our strike. It is a shared, collective action whose scope lies well beyond student interests. We are daring to call for a different world, one far removed from the blind submission our present commodity-based system requires. (CLASSE, 2012)

If student activists in Québec were ultimately successful in overturning tuition hikes, other movements countered collapse, defeat and repression through the pursuit of even larger goals. Rimbaud's original imperative to 'occupy everything' was seized on by many students for whom everything was now occupiable and each space – from the university campus to the city – 'a potential laboratory' for developing new forms of cooperation and revolt (Schwartz-Weinstein, 2012). It is therefore not surprising that occupation-based practices have played a

crucial role in reviving the right to the city as a critical way of thinking about, inhabiting and producing alternative urban spaces. As I hope to show in the concluding comments of this paper, the growing convergence between transnational student struggles and a more expansive geography of occupation has been central to the urban protest camps that have characterized the Arab Spring, the Indignados movement in Spain and Greece and the Occupy movement in the US and the UK.

### **Conclusion: from protest camps to a critical geography of occupation**

In this paper, I have set out to re-examine the relationship between the figure of occupation and the affirmation of an alternative 'right to the city'. As a normative project, the paper builds on and extends recent attempts in this journal to rethink and recast how the 'city' is conceived and theorized (Attoh, 2011; Jacobs, 2012; Lees, 2012; Ward, 2010). More specifically, the paper explores the possibilities of an alternative ontology of the city as seen through the lens of different occupation-based practices that speak to both basic rights claims and demands (housing, education and labour) and *prefigure* other ways of thinking about and inhabiting the city (autonomy and insurgency). In doing so, I have chosen to examine a broad repertoire of practices from the squatting of urban land and housing to university and workplace occupation. This is an ambitious project and one of my main aims here is to extract a *spatial grammar* that seeks to engage with and disrupt the longstanding relationship between capitalist accumulation and urbanization.

If this paper began with the protest camp at St Paul's in London, it should now be clear that questions of occupation have come to *resonate* across a new transnational landscape of protest and dissent. The occupation and reclaiming of urban public space and the assembling of improvised protest camps has become a defining

image of the Arab Spring, the Indignados movement in southern Europe and the global network of Occupy activists. This has, of course, produced a differential geography of practices and experiences across the Global North and South. At stake here for many, as Judith Butler has recently argued, is an incipient right to produce a different world that 'questions structural inequality, capitalism, and the specific sites and practices that exemplify the relation between capitalism and structural inequality' (2012: 11). For others, the very space of occupation became a key site through which an emancipatory urban politics was articulated and developed, often in opposition to specific forms of development and displacement. And for others still, the occupation and reconfiguration of public space was a simple demonstration of resistance to military dictatorships and tyrannical regimes (Butler, 2011).

As a number of scholars have argued, the protest camp, as an emergent and potentially radical political space, has a long history (see Feigenbaum et al., 2013). What this paper suggests is that such a history draws, in part, on a complex genealogy of spatial practices interlinking squatting and other forms of occupation with the seizure and re-appropriation of public space. The common thread connecting the occupations of Tahrir Square in Cairo, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Zuccotti Park in New York, and now Taksim Square in Istanbul with the tactics of urban squatters, labour activists and student protesters is a shared understanding of 'occupation' as a political process that *materializes* the social order which it seeks to enact. As much as the city therefore serves as a necessary condition for political action, we also have to ask, following Butler (2011), how it is that occupation reconfigures the materiality of the urban landscape from the built environment to public space as such, and to what effect? How, in other words, does occupation re-animate and remake the city as a site of radical social transformation?

As I have argued in this paper, the various occupations, demonstrations and camps over the past few years have drawn attention to the possibilities and consequences of the prolonged occupation of urban space and 'the reorganization of its contents, outside the scope of established institutional codes' (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2011: 49). In Tahrir Square in Cairo, after all, it was not just that people seized and amassed in the square. 'They were there', writes Butler,

'sleeping and eating in the public square, constructing toilets and various systems for sharing the space, and so not only refusing to be privatised – refusing to go or stay home – and not only claiming the public domain for themselves – acting in concert on conditions of equality – but also maintaining themselves as persisting bodies with needs, desires and requirements'

(Butler, 2011). A similar process took place in the wake of Hurricane Sandy as Occupy Wall Street rapidly refitted the activist infrastructures first formed in Zuccotti Park in 2011 to offer on-the-ground support for devastated communities across the New York area. As one commentator noted:

Sandy simply makes visible the work Occupiers do and have done each day: the binding together of people and organizations in emotional networks of care and accountability that extend the prefigurative politics of the encampments into the world at large ... Like the Occupy encampment libraries and kitchens, the neighborhood distribution centers are very basic and powerfully effective mobilizations of space to nourish bodies and foster communities. (Jaleel, 2012)

These are not isolated examples. Time and again over the past few years, to 'occupy' has been to insist on building the necessary conditions for social justice and new autonomous forms of common life.<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, a danger here in romanticizing the recent global wave of occupations. University occupations, after all, have come and gone. Protest camps

have been violently razed to the ground and squatting and other forms of urban protest have been increasingly criminalized. And yet, while individual examples have not survived, the logic of occupation endures and continues to resonate across a new landscape of protest and resistance, autonomy and self-determination. Occupation-based practices may perhaps be best understood, therefore, as important ‘laboratories of the politics of the commons’ (Feigenbaum et al., 2013: 233). These are laboratories where people have come together to assemble alternative lifeworlds and articulate new forms of contentious politics. These are also laboratories that cut across a range of different social movements and raise important questions about the relationship between political activity, the figure of occupation and the translocal geographies through which people and places, ideas and objects are continuously connected and shared (Featherstone, 2010, 2013).

It is in the spirit of these very connections that this paper concludes by offering a set of orientations for the production of a *critical geography of occupation* and the articulation of an alternative right to the city. These are:

1. A commitment to a radical imaginary that extends our understanding of how emancipatory urban politics are assembled, contested and made ‘common’. The ‘right to the city’ is thus recast as a process of *commoning* that ‘depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanization’ (Harvey, 2008: 23).
2. A detailed empirical focus on the making of radical urban infrastructures. While infrastructures have often splintered contemporary cities into jarring archipelagos of wealth and poverty, this paper places particular emphasis on the relationship between occupation and the making of alternative forms of shared living.
3. An *historical* perspective that re-imagines the city as a living archive of alternative

knowledges, materials and resources. The building of autonomous forms of urban living depends, in this respect, on a rich sedimented history of practices and imaginaries that speak to the shifting conditions of possibility for the composition of a radical urban politics.

Taken together, these orientations draw attention to the different ways in which new, provisional, often ephemeral and sometimes durable urban worlds are composed in settings of growing inequity (Simone, 2004: 240). The overarching aim of this paper is to provide, in this context, a broader theoretical basis for re-examining some important dimensions of occupation – the ways in which alternative spheres are pieced together and new orientations toward the city are produced and secured. In the end, this demands perhaps a grounded reconsideration of the potential dispensation of autonomous life in the city. While this depends on a critical perspective that draws attention to the sufferings and injustices of city life, it also recasts the ‘right to the city’ as a ‘right’ to forge other different spaces. To produce a critical geography of occupation is ultimately to recognize and acknowledge the emergent possibilities of this ‘other world’ and ‘other life’ (Foucault, 2011: 340).

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## Notes

1. I have altered the Wyatt Mason translation of Rimbaud’s ‘Blankets of Blood’ in the *Complete Poems*. His translation of the phrase ‘a tout occupé’ is ultimately unsatisfying.

2. Both 'occupy' and 'occupation' are, of course, terms with long and complex genealogies (see Rabie, 2012).
3. In this respect, I disagree with AbdouMalik Simone's assertion that 'the notion of the right to the city – even in its efforts to include and equalize – is limited in that it tends to specify in advance the "city" to which rights are to be granted' (2011: 356). While a prefigurative recasting of the right to the city places renewed emphasis on assembling a different form of urban politics, the content of that politics is itself a product of continuous adaptation, experimentation and improvisation.
4. The student movement in the UK has been revived in 2013 and early 2014 with a new round of occupations and protests across the country.
5. The recent emergence of protest camps in the Ukraine also raises important questions about the use of 'occupation' for other more reactionary forms of contentious politics.

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